

Appendix C

the

Hiragana and Katakana

Explained

Japanese Writing Systems

Japanese is written using several different kinds of characters for different purposes.

English-style (Roman) letters are called **romaji**. These are sometimes used for trademarks, advertising slogans, and commands to some old-fashioned computers.

The **kanji** are Chinese-style characters that the Japanese adopted around the fifth century A.D. Kanji are still used to write many words in Japanese.

漢字

The **kana** are simpler symbols that stand for sounds. There are two kinds of kana: **hiragana** and **katakana**.

The **hiragana** characters are written in a curving, flowing style. They are used for writing some native Japanese words and word endings.

ひらがな

The **katakana** are more angular characters. They are used mostly for writing foreign-derived words. Words adapted into Japanese from English or other European languages are usually written in katakana.

カタカナ

Many words may be written in either kanji or kana depending on the educational level of the writer and readers. Kana are used most heavily in documents for people who do not know many kanji yet, such as Japanese children. Also, kana are sometimes written above difficult or obscure kanji, to explain the meaning of the kanji.

Usually each kana symbol stands for one syllable. (There are a few kana characters that stand not for syllables, but for modifications to other syllables.)

To develop a full understanding of the relationship between kana and their sounds, you will need to study spoken Japanese so that you will understand the system of sounds. The best way to learn spoken Japanese is to study with a skilled teacher who is fluent in the language.

It could also help to use [TileTag for Kana](#) to play sounds associated with the kana.

Hiragana and Katakana Explained

The Basic-Form Hiragana and Katakana

The table below shows the basic hiragana and katakana in their usual "alphabetical order." (Two of the w- kana, wi and we, are rarely used in modern times.)

The Basic Hiragana					
	A あ	I い	U う	E え	O お
K	ka か	ki き	ku く	ke け	ko こ
S	sa さ	si(shi) し	su す	se セ	so そ
T	ta た	ti(chi) ち	tu(tsu) つ	te て	to と
N	na な	ni に	nu ぬ	ne ね	no の
H	ha は	hi ひ	hu(fu) ふ	he へ	ho ほ
M	ma ま	mi み	mu む	me め	mo も
Y	ya や		yu ゆ		yo よ
R	ra ら	ri り	ru る	re れ	ro ろ
W	wa わ	wi ゐ		we ゑ	wo を
final N ん					
The Basic Katakana					
	A ア	I イ	U ウ	E エ	O オ
K	ka カ	ki キ	ku ク	ke ケ	ko コ
S	sa サ	si(shi) シ	su ス	se セ	so ソ
T	ta タ	ti(chi) チ	tu(tsu) ツ	te テ	to ト
N	na ナ	ni ニ	nu ヌ	ne ネ	no ノ
H	ha ハ	hi ヒ	hu(fu) フ	he ヘ	ho ホ
M	ma マ	mi ミ	mu ム	me メ	mo モ
Y	ya ヤ		yu ユ		yo ヨ
R	ra ラ	ri リ	ru ル	re レ	ro ロ
W	wa ワ	wi ヰ		we ヱ	wo ヲ
final N ン					

The vowels are pronounced approximately as in:
"fAther's elIte attitUde gEts Old."

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Learn the hiragana and
katakana by playing a game:
TileTag for Kana!
<http://www.bitboost.com>
sales@bitboost.com
421 E. Drachman,
Tucson AZ 85705, USA
(520) 623-6326 (USA phone)

B is spoken with the lips less tightly closed than in English.
R is pronounced with a bit of a trill and somewhat resembling English L.

You can print this table for easy reference.

It shows the kana in the typescript form usually seen in books and computer output. (1)

The Voiced and Plosive (G-, Z-, D-, P-, B-) Forms

Japanese also includes some other consonants that aren't in the tables above. Let's see how those other consonants are written.

The kana for these other consonants are created by adding marks to the basic-form kana.

When the consonants k, s and t are spoken, the speaker's vocal cords don't vibrate. If the vocal cords vibrate, these consonants change:

k becomes g

s becomes z

t becomes d

(To help you to understand about this vibration, you can try to speak these consonants with a finger resting gently on your adam's apple to feel when there is vibration.)

This vibration is indicated by drawing two dots or short lines to the upper right of a kana.

ka か ga が

sa さ za ざ

etc...

The consonant p is spoken much like h, but with initially closed or pursed lips. To show this we draw a little circle, like closed lips opening.

ha は pa ぱ

hi ひ pi ぴ

etc...

The consonant b is spoken much like p, but with vibrating vocal cords. To show this we draw two short lines to the upper right of an h+vowel kana.

ha は ba ば

hi ひ bi び

etcetera...

By using these tricks to create some kana from others, the Japanese made it easier to learn the kana for syllables having g, z, p, b, etc.

The voiced and plosive consonants are on the right side of the table below. (You might have to scroll

your browser window to see them.)

The Hiragana

	A あ	I い	U う	E え	O お			
K	ka か	ki き	ku く	ke け	ko こ	G	ga が	gi
S	sa さ	si(shi) し	su す	se セ	so そ	Z	za ざ	(ji)
T	ta た	ti(chi) ち	tu(tsu) つ	te て	to と	D	da だ	(ji)
N	na な	ni に	nu ぬ	ne ね	no の			
H	ha は	hi ひ	hu(fu) ふ	he へ	ho ほ	P	ha ば	pi
M	ma ま	mi み	mu む	me め	mo も	_ B	ba ば	bi
Y	ya や		yu ゆ		yo よ			
R	ra ら	ri り	ru る	re れ	ro ろ			
W	wa わ	wi ゐ		we ゑ	wo を			
final N	ん							

The Katakana

	A ア	I イ	U ウ	E エ	O オ			
K	ka カ	ki キ	ku ク	ke ケ	ko コ	G	ga ガ	gi
S	sa サ	si(shi) シ	su ス	se セ	so ソ	Z	za ザ	(ji)
T	ta タ	ti(chi) チ	tu(tsu) ツ	te テ	to ト	D	da ダ	(ji)
N	na ナ	ni ニ	nu ヌ	ne ネ	no ノ			
H	ha ハ	hi ヒ	hu(fu) フ	he ヘ	ho ホ	P	ha バ	pi
M	ma マ	mi ミ	mu ム	me メ	mo モ	_ B	ba バ	bi
Y	ya ヤ		yu ユ		yo ヨ			
R	ra ラ	ri リ	ru ル	re レ	ro ロ			
W	wa ワ	wi ヱ		we ヲ	wo ヲ			
final N	ン							

The vowels are pronounced approximately as in: "fAther's elIte attitUde gEts Old."

B is spoken with the lips less tightly closed than in English.

R is pronounced with a bit of a trill and somewhat resembling English L.

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Learn kana faster by playing a computer game: TileTag(TM) from BitB

You can print this table for easy reference.

To show the whole chart on one page you might need to print in landscape mode.⁽²⁾

Reprint of page 4 in landscape to
view all columns.

The Hiragana

A	あ	I	い	U	う	E	え	O	お	G	が	gi	ぎ	gu	ぐ	ge	げ	go	ご
K	か	ki	き	ku	く	ke	け	ko	こ	Z	ざ	(ji)	じ	zu	ず	ze	ぜ	zo	ぞ
T	た	ti(chi)	ち	tu(tsu)	つ	te	て	to	と	D	だ	(ji)	ぢ	zu	づ	de	で	do	ど
N	な	ni	に	nu	ぬ	ne	ね	no	の										
H	は	hi	ひ	hu(fu)	ふ	he	へ	ho	ほ	P	ば	pi	ぴ	pu	ぷ	pe	ぺ	po	ぽ
M	ま	mi	み	mu	む	me	め	mo	も	B	ば	bi	び	bu	ぶ	be	べ	bo	ぼ
Y	や			yu	ゆ			yo	よ										
R	ら	ri	り	ru	る	re	れ	ro	ろ										
W	わ	wi	ゐ			we	ゑ	wo	を										
final N	ん																		

The Katakana

A	ア	I	イ	U	ウ	E	エ	O	オ	G	ガ	gi	ギ	グ	グ	ge	ゲ	go	ゴ
K	カ	ki	キ	ku	ク	ke	ケ	ko	コ	Z	ザ	(ji)	ジ	ズ	ズ	ze	ゼ	zo	ゾ
T	タ	ti(chi)	チ	tu(tsu)	ツ	te	テ	to	ト	D	ダ	(ji)	ヂ	ヅ	ヅ	de	デ	do	ド
N	ナ	ni	ニ	nu	ヌ	ne	ネ	no	ノ										
H	ハ	hi	ヒ	hu(fu)	フ	he	ヘ	ho	ホ	P	パ	pi	ピ	プ	プ	pe	ペ	po	ポ
M	マ	mi	ミ	mu	ム	me	メ	mo	モ	B	バ	bi	ビ	ブ	ブ	be	ベ	bo	ボ
Y	ヤ			yu	ユ			yo	ヨ										
R	ラ	ri	リ	ru	ル	re	レ	ro	ロ										
W	ワ	wi	ヰ			we	ヱ	wo	ヲ										
final N	ン																		

The vowels are pronounced approximately as in: "fAther's eIlte attitUde gEt's Old."

R is enbun with the line less tightly placed than in English

Long Vowels

In Japanese, vowels may be single-length or double-length. A double-length vowel lasts twice as long as a single-length vowel. A single-length vowel has a different meaning than a double-length vowel, just as in English different consonants or different vowels have different meanings.

Double vowels are written with two vowel kana in sequence. For example, in hiragana:

"a" is written as: あ.

"aa" is written as: ああ.

The vowels e and o are sometimes doubled by adding different vowels:

"ee" can be written as either ええ (ee) or えい (ei).

"oo" can be written as either おお (oo) or おう (ou).

These methods of writing long vowels apply for katakana as well as for hiragana, even though the examples above happen to be hiragana.

Long Consonants

You can show that a consonant is lengthened by writing a miniature "tsu" kana before the consonant. However, if you want to double "n," you should write the normal kana for "n," rather than a small "tsu."

Example: とっても = tottemo (3)

Y Diphthongs (KYA, GYU, BYO, etc.) and the general SH, CH, J sounds

Japanese includes syllables of a <consonant + Y + vowel> pattern. These are written by writing a normal

<consonant + I> kana, plus a <miniature Y + vowel> kana.

A hiragana example:

"ki" = き

"ya" = や

so "kya" = ki + ya = きや

From the basic hiragana chart, we already know we can write "shi" as し, "chi" as ち, and "ji" as じ.

We already know katakana for these syllables also. But spoken Japanese also includes combinations of these consonants with other vowels: "sha", "sho", "shu", "cha", "ja", etc. How can we write these?

We can write them by combining a "shi" or "chi" kana with a small <y + vowel> kana. For example:

"shi" = し

"ya" = や

so "sha" = shi + ya = しや

Special Spellings

A few words have strange spellings for historical reasons. For example, the hiragana は normally means the sound "ha," but for historical reasons it is used to write the preposition/particle "wa." Similarly a special hiragana を is used for the preposition/particle "o", even though the sound "o" is usually written as お.

Putting It All Together

The Japanese write using hiragana, katakana, kanji, and romaji, as we explained in "Japanese Writing Systems" above. Japanese is usually written either top-to-bottom⁽⁴⁾ or left-to-right. Unlike in English, words are not normally separated by spaces. Punctuation is fairly similar to English, except that if a question ends in the question word "ka," a period rather than a question mark ends the sentence. The sentence below is an example of such a 'period-question.'

わかりますか。(5)

いいですねえ！

Software Teaches the Hiragana and Katakana

You can learn all the kana by playing a computer game: TileTag for Kana™. TileTag™ was designed to be enjoyable, and has been refined through the repeated feedback of students and teachers of Japanese. It costs only \$16, which is a great price for making kana study enjoyable and easier. If you're not sure about it, you can download a free 40-character version of TileTag for Kana, with 20 katakana and 20 hiragana.

This web page "About the Hiragana and Katakana" is based on part of a manual included with TileTag for Kana.

Notes

(1) **Typescript** forms are the forms of the characters used in most typeset and printed documents. Handwriting can be a little different.

(2) **Landscape mode** is the printing mode where the page is turned 90 degrees, so the paper's longer dimension is the width instead of the height. Ways of setting this may vary between different browsers and printers.

To print in landscape mode, you might try picking File - Print from your browser's main menu, and in the print window that appears, try clicking on the "Properties" button. Somewhere in the window that then appears, there should be an "Orientation" option that you can switch to "Landscape." Then print. The next time that you print, you can set the option back to "Portrait."

(3) "tottemo" means "very, extremely."

(4) The example of vertically written hiragana script says "Ii desu nee!" (which means, more or less, "This is cool!")

(5) わかりますか。 = wakarimasu ka? (which means "Do you understand?")

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